GOOD, BETTER, BEST---IN NATIVE IRISES

by

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A list of the "best" irises---or any other flowers---must of necessity be very flexible indeed. In the last analysis, the matter of individual taste unavoidably enters in; and, as we all know, tastes vary as widely as the color and form of the flower under consideration. For example, I prefer single roses, while most connoisseurs quite ignore the lovely but unostentatious display of the singles. So, no matter how many points of excellence chalked up by one variety, another may be given preference because the judge is swayed by the indefinable appeal of the flower.

Another factor which must enter into the judging and grouping of Louisiana irises is their wide variation as to type, and the sort of site in which the prospective grower intends planting them. Most forms of Iris giganticaerulea are ideal for large grounds, for mass effects behind lower plants. They flourish in natural bogs, practically taking care of themselves year after year. At the other extreme, some Louisiana forms are so tiny as to be suitable for growing in a moist shady rock garden. In between are the many large-flowered types, of medium height---to my mind the best for the average garden. But judging all of these by the same standards would be utterly impossible.

When we first began growing Louisiana irises there was no thought of selecting. So excited were we to find the colorful things, and to learn that they would actually succeed in our gardens, we were not critical. To us they were all beautiful---as indeed they were, and are. But most collectors could command only a limited space for planting, so the sifting out began.

Before this stage, most enthusiasts just collected, looking for unusual colors, as a rule, Never shall I forget a mad chase down Bayou Salle, nearly to the Gulf! Mrs. Henry and I were bitterly disappointed at finding no reds; but to this day I treasure an odd and lovely blue we brought back. The discovery of reds, yellows, and pinks was most unsettling; but after our return to sanity,

all began loving the blues again. In a way, this indiscriminate collecting was necessary, for at first no one knew which varieties would succeed best under cultivation.

Now that growers everywhere are becoming interested in the possibilities of our native irises for gardens, the time has come for us to work out a list of plants which we consider best fitted for this purpose. We do know that certain individuals have grown them in gardens, and had wonderful displays to show for their efforts. But, so far as I know, no one has kept a complete record of results. Now, at last, we have a Test Garden, where careful observations will be made, and the day-by-day story set down for the benefit of all.

My own place was not a fair testing-out spot, for here were natural bogs, shade and coolness. However, for many years I have given plants to friends in various localities, with gardens representing different types of soil and conditions. From these I have received reports, and thus been enabled to come to conclusions in regard to certain matters. Many gardens were visited and observed.

There is little doubt that Mrs. Dan Debaillon, who collected the greatest number of varieties grown in cultivation, also went farther than others in the work of testing out for garden purposes. The second year I had her collection there was a gorgeous display of blooms, and the first thought that struck me was, "Why, these are magnificent garden flowers!" I had planted them all together in a plot entirely separate from my other iris. It was in full sun, in soil that was rather tight, but acid, and with plenty of humus. They had no artificial watering, but it was a year of abundant rain. In this wonder-plot I was busy with pencil and paper from early morning until too dark to see in the evening. When I had time to go over those notes and digest them, they were very revealing.

Now, right here I want to take issue with the iris judges who place high rating on extreme height of stem. In our gardens, why whould we desire plants which give us flowers at eye level? Personally, I prefer to look down into

their faces, and thus see their every perfection. As was stated in the beginning, tastes vary; but for garden beds, give me irises which do not exceed three feet in height, and two is even better. In that Debaillon plot, only a few reached three feet; some of the loveliest were borne on eighteen-inch stems. The effect was breath-taking. A list of the best will be given.

Next, Nature took a hand at testing out. The following winter brought us the devastating February freeze. After two weeks of almost summer heat, the thermometer dropped to ten. The embryo iris buds were above ground, and almost all were lost. Now, friends from farther North, get out your notebooks! Haile Selassie, Peggy Mac, Bonrouge, Cajan, Reflected Light, Caroline Dormon, Gulf Sunshine, and Lillian Trichel came through almost unscathed, and bloomed beautifully at the regular season. Most of the Fulva group, including the exquisite Thomas Yellow, suffered little from the cold. This is not surprising, as the type I. fulva grows as far north as Missouri. Of course those belonging to I. flexicaulis were not affected by the cold, as they bloom much later than other types. Surprisingly, the robust giants, giganticaerulea forms, were cut down by the freeze...not surprising, either, when one remembers that giganticaerulea is a lower Mississippi type. There were a few blossoms in sheltered spots.

Determined to complete the job, Nature gave us a record-breaking drought the following summer. By that time I had moved most of the Debaillon iris to a new garden, with semi-shade and constant moisture. However, a good many remained in the original plot. There were no facilities for artificial watering, and the ground baked and cracked. I felt sure not one plant would survive. But when winter rains came at last, shoots began to appear. Now, after all this, which ones stood out as being able to "take it"? Two, above all others, came out with banners flying: Bonrouge and Cajan (both well named, non?). So these two shall head the list of good garden iris.

Bonrouge is one which Mrs. Debaillon collected in 1932, near Paradis, I think. It opens a brilliant rose-red, and the big flowers are very graceful.

It holds about four days, the color fading gradually to rich rose, but losing none of its charm thereby. The stems are slender and foliage attractive; height about two feet. It is a prolific bloomer, producing a mass of color; and most remarkable quality of all, it blooms for a period of weeks, longer than any iris I have seen.

Cajan (Mrs. Debaillon called it "Faulk Pink") is a gay thing of brilliant rose, amber, and gold-brown. It is about the height of Bonrouge, which it resembels slightly. It is one of the hardiest, persisting under any and all conditions.

Right beside Bonrouge, I planted what Mrs. Debaillon called "Chacahoula Blue", and it was a happy combination. The indescribable soft blue (not in color chart!) of the latter was perfect with the gay rose-red of Bonrouge. Now this blue does not belong to I. giganticaerulea, but is of the flat type--- exactly the same form as Bonrouge, and same height. It, too, bloomed over a long period, and fulfilled all the requirements of a good garden iris.

In this same plot there were a number of fine varieties which would be outstanding in any garden. Mary Debaillon, and enormous bicolor, dainty as any orchid, is one of the most arresting. It often bears two great blossoms on one stalk. Mrs. Cammie Henry is a lovely clear rose, with broad, slightly drooping sepals. It is very hardy, and proves it by surviving many vicissitudes. A very good iris is one which Mrs. Debaillon called "Woodcarver's lavender-blue" (because she found it near a woodcarver's house!). It is a fine color, the bright yellow crest set off by a deep violet line. It, too, is most prolific--- simply lavish with its blossoms. David Fischer is English violet, beautiful flowers on two-foot stems. As a blending medium for all these brilliant colors, there were several varieties with blossoms of deep cream, Magnolia Petal probably the best, because of its size and firm texture. The many whites, too, gave an ethereal quality to the scene. One marked simply, "Paradis white" is one of the best---broad sepals of sparkling white, with a wide lemon crest. Jeune Fille, an unusually frilly white of giganticaerulea form, but not so tall,

is exquisite. Wild Swan is the largest of the whites.

For color effect in the garden, Gulf Sunshine is outstanding. The small flowers, goldenrod with orange crest, are most attractive. Often there are three flowers on one stem, making a brilliant spot of color. The stems are seldom more than eighteen inches.

In our study of iris, it is hoped we will become more color-conscious. The habit of calling anything between blue and red, "purple", is an abomination; because somewhere in that category come the heavenly shades of violet-blue---my favorite color. Mrs. Debaillon must have loved it, because in her collection there are six or seven different irises in slightly varying shades of violet. One she gave me in 1932 seems to be the same as I. atrocyanea, named by Dr. Small, and illustrated in Addisonia. It is an even, deep, blue-violet---not in any color-chart---with a clean yellow crest. Gretna is even more blue, with just a thread of pale green-yellow crest. These fine and unsual flowers of deepest violet-blue are quite distinct from just ordinary "purple", and deserve more attention. While on the subject of violet shades, mention must be made of one Mrs. Debaillon called "V. L. Minuet" (I think because given her by Mr. Minuet). The flowers are not large, but it is a prolific bloomer, and very hardy. The color can be described only as black-blue--violet, one of the darkest of native irises. The broad "stepped" crest is brilliant yellow, and the effect is most arresting. Just one more in this class must be mentioned---a sort of mystery iris. It was probably brought to North Louisiana by Judge Whitfield Jack (deceased), uncle of Mrs. Trichel. One fact is certain: it has been grown in several gardens for about twenty-five years. But several years ago Mr. Bazet brought me "the most beautiful deep blue iris you ever saw"---his words. Each year when it blooms, I decide that he was right. It came from the bogs near Houma---and was identical with the "mystery blue"! The texture is like panne velvet, and the color just does not exist---that is, in paints.

"But why are you leaving out the Abbeville iris?", is surely being asked those who have seen these wonder-flowers. The answer is, they belong in a class all to themselves; not only for their gorgeous colors---unmatched shades of red and yellow---but for their remarkable form and texture. From what they were derived no one knows; but certain it is they have been in that locality long enough to establish a definite character. Among the reds, beautiful Homahoula would surely lead the parade, with Bayou Vermilion not far behind. Both are rich crimson, Homahoula darker. Cardinalis is nearer scarlet than any iris I have seen, and is more graceful than either of the preceding. Haile Selassie, too well known to need description, is even, spectrum violet. All of these have very narrow, long, bright yellow crests. All, too, are of such heavy texture as to be almost leathery. The only flower of Homahoula I ever saw (sent to me when first discovered), had been open four days, had traveled more than two hundred miles in a car---and was still in perfect condition! The form of the Abbeville yellows is about the same, but the texture is not quite so firm as that of the reds. The best that I have seen are Reflected Light and Mei Ling, both with graceful seven-inch flowers. The latter is the brighter shade, goldenrod predominating. The Abbeville irises are certainly garden flowers par excellence, just the right height, very showy, and quite robust. A very odd one is Peggy Mac, with exceedingly broad petals and sepals of magenta-rose; and sometimes three of these remarkable flowers borne on one eighteen-inch stem! Also, this plant is quite cold-resistant. Does all this point to a mixture of <u>flexicaulis</u> and <u>fulva</u> blood? (Page the botanists!)

In listing "good" irises, I must come back to our first love, good old <u>I. giganticaerulea</u> (one of the few which we dare refer to as a <u>species</u>!) Nothing could be finer than some of the celestial shades found among the blues. I thought there could be no more, but one appeared in the Debaillon collection which was nearer true blue than any iris I have seen...big flowers on three-foot stems. This I named Ruth Marsalis. There are some very fine whites; and New Orleans is an immense flower of dusty rose. For the owner of large grounds, with a natural bog, nothing can be finer than <u>giganticaerulea</u>.

sit before my winter fire and evoke a clearcut mental picture of the flower, then that iris deserves a name by which it can be designated.

Many fine irises have been left out of this list. What better all-all-round garden plant could be desired than Dr. Small's vinicolor? In my Debaillon plot, there was one stem which produced ten flowers, rich wine-red, holding their color in the hottest sun.

And no one has mentioned the attractive dwarfs---that will have to come in another story. But I say, go right ahead, you hybridizers, and produce Louisiana irises as big as breakfast plates if you like---but I an developing a strain of dwarfs! Just one word of protest here: why do we persist in calling all the iris with short zig-zag stems "foliosa? That term was first applied to the group with such luxuriant foliage that it completely hides the flowers. Now, we have many irises with lovely flowers quite close to the ground, but not in the least covered by the leaves. Dr. Small's name, brevipes, is much more descriptive of the latter group. In fairness, the two forms should be kept distinct.

And so for "good" Louisiana irises---probably getting better---but already very, very good.